

Life in the Publishing Business, From Two Angles

Here are two more of the letters that were entered in the "publisher or publisher's employee on any phase of publishing" class of BOOKS AND THE BOOK WORLD's recent Prize Letter Contest.

Both these contestants are known to us. At their requests their names are here withheld.

The Complete Publisher.

TO THE EDITOR OF BOOKS AND THE BOOK WORLD—Sir: It is the custom of the would be humorous commentator always to play up to the full the troubles of his daily occupation, even to the point of insisting that his own business is absolutely the worst. But no one can say with truth that the publishing business is not a most delightful one—in the opinion of the present commentator the most worth while employment one could ask for.

Few people who have not given the subject much thought realize how great a variety of trades and occupations are comprised in publishing affairs. To touch on just the outlines:

To begin with, he who publishes books must have some general knowledge of literature, some love for books as books. Without this he will not gain the confidence of the writers of books, and lacking this he is a failure. If he is not in essence a literary man he must be something approaching it.

If he be a magazine publisher as well as a book publisher he must have the qualities already enumerated and in addition he will be possessed, at least to some degree, of a knowledge of present day affairs—politics, art, social economy and whatever makes life interesting day by day. The number of periodicals he publishes may be great or small and the magazines may be what are called general magazines, or class publications. His ambition is, probably, to possess them all.

To sell his books and magazines he must have an acute ear for judging the public, to suit his works to changing tastes and to do his share in leading public thought along better lines. Thus he must be a good advertiser, both "coming and going," as we say. That is, he must spend his own money wisely in advertising and induce the merchants to spend their money wisely in the periodicals he publishes.

If he prints his own publications he must have the skill of a manufacturer. He must know about all the mechanical processes and improve his machinery by having the courage to discard presses and appliances of all kinds as soon as they appear to be going out of date. In this department of his work he has to deal with as many different kinds of workmen as the maker of any other complicated production, and at all times he must keep the canons of taste in mind while striving his best to make his books and magazines efficiently and with due economy.

He must be a good salesman and learn more or less perfectly the various arts of selling his books through bookstores, through agents, through the mail, as premiums and in any other way which his ingenuity can suggest. Many publishers thus have their own bookstores, sometimes as many as a million customers through the post office, and subscription branches in a score or more large cities. Quite as varied are the ways of selling his magazines.

He must be a financier of some acuteness. His business requires more capital for the amount of turnover than almost any other. For example, he must begin to set up and prepare his books and magazines months in advance of publication, and when the happy day of first

issuance comes his money investment has only fairly begun. He gives "the trade," the instalment buyer, the mail order customer, a long time for paying. To figure that his investment will be tied up a year is, on the average, not an overstatement. As a rule he pays the author long before he is himself repaid.

These things are not mentioned as troubles; on the contrary, they are the points in the game he plays which absorb him. His profits are great or small very nearly in the proportion of his ability and energy. Large fortunes are not acquired by publishers—but that's another story.

American publishing is still in its swaddling clothes; its expansion in the last decade has been remarkable, not only in volume, but certainly it has greatly improved its quality. Sensational and flashy novels to the contrary, the trend is always upward. The table book horror of bygone days has been replaced by sets of well known authors from Shakespeare to O. Henry, and one has only to compare the so-called penny weeklies of England with our cheap magazines and periodicals to find much to encourage one.

No space is great enough to recount the benefits received in the lasting friendship with the most interesting and worth while people in the world brought about by this beneficent occupation. That the publisher is a hardened skinflint and the author a sheep-like animal, even the professional humorist has ceased to play up as a standard joke. The publisher is as honest as his neighbors and the average author as reasonable and friendly as the average human animal. As time goes on the financial arrangement of the two will no doubt be more precise and lead to greater confidence on both sides.

It is a good calling to be engaged in and is growing better.

"ONE WHO HAS ENJOYED THE LIFE."

—If You Don't Weaken.

TO THE EDITOR OF BOOKS AND THE BOOK WORLD—Sir: I am employed by a large firm of publishers and I enjoy my work—mostly. It is varied. In fact I am one of that legion of young men who infest the literary life of the nation as book scouts, author getters, "publishers' representatives." Like my fellows I could not in a word answer the question which is so frequently asked: "Exactly, what is it you do in the publishing house?"

We do many things. Some of us have titles: Literary Adviser, Editorial Manager, Manuscript Reader, Managing Editor, or what not, but most of us couldn't entitle our numerous functions. By and large we are a hard working and well meaning set even if the vice of lunching into midafternoon didn't end with July 1, as some pessimists might have expected.

To get on with the tale. The literary game is a great life—if you don't weaken. It is such pleasant work to spend one's days in leisurely contemplation of the literary world and in close communion with the great creative artists of the time. Yes, sure! This is how one publisher's handy man spent an average day.

The programme was not unusual. Besides the mail—always a big point in the editorial side of a publishing house—contacts with all sorts of things and people must be maintained at all costs—and the office routine, there was a morning conference of the whole book department to decide upon the acceptance or rejection of a half a dozen or more MSS. that had passed the hurdles of readers and salesmen, a luncheon appointment with a promising author who had been flirting with us, an afternoon appointment with an accepted author to discuss plans for (1) the format and binding of his book, (2) its illustrations, (3) the selling campaign; a sheaf of ten or fifteen MS. reports to study and the inevitable pile of MSS passed by other readers that must be read by this humble narrator before they may be brought up for final acceptance—or rejection.

Is the programme carried out? Well, let's see.

One arrives at the office late, as is the custom of all commuters, and is greeted by a grimy faced boy from the composing room who demands an instantaneous O. K. upon a page of proof which he holds out invitingly. Starts to read it with concentration when stenographer interrupts to call attention to a memorandum. "Call Mr. Brown immediately," it says. (Mr. Brown is the literary editor of a big New York paper and can't be kept

waiting). Puts in call for Mr. Brown. Returns to proof.

Telephone rings. "This is Mr. Black. How soon am I to get galley proofs of my novel? I'm going abroad next week and must have the proofs immediately."

"All right, Mr. Black," answers our stalwart literary scene shifter, "I'll look them up and let you know." He is not to be put off so easily, however, for while the printer's devil stands first on one foot and then on the other Mr. Black requires considerable detailed explanation as to matters in regard to his book—how many illustrations finally were chosen, how they are to be placed in the book, whether his corrections in the captions were made, and whether we finally used his middle name on the title page as he demanded. Details, details—hell is paved with them. Yet we cannot shift Mr. Black to different departments. We must answer, and we do.

At it again. Phone rings.

"Hello."

"Hello."

"Well?"

"Well?"

"Who's calling," he asks with some asperity. The sweet voiced answer comes back over the wire, "Did you want the Planet?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon. I had a call in for Mr. Brown."

Mr. Brown, when he comes on the wire, wants a photograph of Miss So-and-So, who is an accomplished writer, but who wisely withholds her photograph from the public press. Our subject endeavors to appease Mr. Brown's desire for a picture

without telling him why. The newspaper man rings off with a grunt as to the lack of enterprise of publishers. (If he only knew the wily enterprise that withholds the photograph!)

Back at the proof again, when office boy shoves a calling card between the eyes of the laborer and the printed page, "Miss Alice Fitzroy Blank," he reads.

"Who is she?" he asks the boy. No matter who she is, it's the handy man's job to see her. She has a letter of introduction. (Can you blame us for lunching till 3:30 and stumbling when you ask us just what it is we do at the publishing house?)

"Tell her to wait." Which our friend is perfectly sure she will do. They always do.

He struggles through the proof, casts a regretful glance at the unopened mail which he hides in a drawer, neatly piles up the hour's accumulation of miscellaneous memoranda, clippings, &c., to give the appearance of knowing their contents, tells his stenographer to summon him by telephone on some pretext if he does not return from the perils of the interview within fifteen minutes, and goes forth to the battle ground of the reception room, a valiant soldier of literature to meet what ere betide.

The lady is middle aged, well dressed, attractive and practises unscrupulously the art of flattery. She wants a job.

"Not, you understand, that it is of necessity, but I am so deeply interested in literature and I have heard so much of

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